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GE 003

Monthly Tips for Food Gardeners

(Note: Planting dates are for Central Maryland. Western and northern counties could be 1-2 weeks later and southern Maryland and the eastern shore could be 1-2 weeks earlier.)

January

Decide on a good site for a new vegetable garden: sunny, level, accessible to water.

Make a garden plan. Put your plan in a notebook or garden journal and start recording ideas, notes from reading or websites.

Purchase a high-low thermometer, to track weather patterns throughout the year.

Order catalogs and seeds, especially if you want to start slow-growing, unusual or heirloom varieties indoors under lights. (See HG #70 "Recommended Vegetable Cultivars for Maryland Home Gardens" on the Grow It Eat It web site).

Test viability of saved or leftover seeds by placing 20 on a moist paper towel; roll up and put in perforated plastic bag. Set bag on top of refrigerator; in 7 days, count sprouted seeds. If less than 70 percent, toss out and buy new seed.

February

If starting seeds indoors, set up florescent grow lights, and gather needed materials: pots, trays, soil less mix.

Early in the month, start seeds of early crops, such as leeks, onions, shallots and artichokes indoors, under florescent lights. Also start peppers- they are very slow growing.

Later in the month, start seeds indoors of beets, turnips, Chinese cabbage, kale and other early crops. These will be ready to set out in the garden in 3-5 weeks. (Or, direct seed these crops in the garden as soon as soil can be worked.)

Build a cold frame. Late in the month, add compost and good soil; sow spinach, lettuce, or a mesclun mix for early greens.

Start a compost pile if you don't have one.

March

If you did not test soil in fall, as soon as ground thaws, take soil samples from different parts of the garden, to a depth of 6 to 8 inches. Send to a soil testing lab (University of Maryland's Home and Garden Information Center, www.hgic.umd.edu, tells how to take samples and lists regional lab; see "Selecting Soil Test Lab," HG#110.)

Amend soil according to soil test results, which may call for adding lime or other nutrients. When the ground can be worked, dig in that layer of well-aged manure, compost, mushroom soil, or leaf mold to improve soil texture and fertility.

Put up trellises and teepees for peas, pole beans and other climbers. Waiting until plants come up can harm plant roots.

Harden off leeks, shallots, and onions in cold frame, or set outside on a porch or protected area, a few hours a day at first, before bringing them in at dusk; then gradually working up to eight hours a day. Do this for about a week, before transplanting in the garden. (Follow this same procedure for any crop started indoors.)

As soon as soil can be worked, plant potatoes, peas, onion sets, leeks and other cool weather crops, including beets, Chinese cabbage, kale mustard and turnips.

Apply water around the base of seedlings when planting that contains a soluble fertilizer. This will help roots grow strong.

Sow more seeds of spinach, lettuce, arugula and other salad greens in cold frames or in the vegetable bed, under row covers. (Floating row covers are

made of spun-bonded polyester. They let in air, light and water, offer some protection from frost, and exclude insects and bigger critters.)

Start seeds of eggplant, pepper (if not started in February) broccoli and cabbage indoors under lights, to be ready for planting outdoors in six to eight weeks.

Keep a garden planner or journal. Note each activity, with date, in your garden notebook. Jot down weather, temperature, when seeds germinate, plants flower and fruit. Take pictures. Note insects and diseases. All this information will guide you in seasons to come.

April

Continue to sow lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, beets and other favorite salad vegetables.

Thin seedlings of leafy greens, to a few inches apart and eat the ones you pull. Check planting chart for final spacing between mature plants.

Plant seeds of carrots, turnips and parsnips in deeply worked, well-draining soil.

Start Brussels sprouts indoors, under lights, to be planted out in late May, for fall harvest.

Start seeds of tomato seeds indoors under lights, to be ready for transplanting outdoors in six to eight weeks.

Don't jump the gun with warm season crops; plant outside only after all danger of frost is past. (Night temperatures below 45° F. can damage plants and later fruiting.)

Optional: lay down black plastic mulch to warm the soil, two to three weeks before planting warm season crops, like tomato, pepper, eggplant, and melon. Plastic mulch also keeps down weeds. (Biodegradable non-plastic mulch, made out of corn, is now available; www.highmowingseeds.com is one source.)

Sow beans and corn outdoors late this month or early May, when soil temperatures are above 50° F. (Or pre-start them indoors to get them off to a faster start.)

Start squash, melon and cucumbers indoors to be transplanted in the garden, in two to three weeks. (These plants also benefit from black plastic or biodegradable mulch.) Or, plant them directly in the garden, in late May through mid-June.

Start seeds of herbs, including rosemary, thyme, lavender, sage, basil and tarragon. Make cuttings of

fresh mint, tarragon and rosemary from potted plants or from stems purchased in food markets. Root the cuttings in soil less mix, under lights.

Intersperse vegetables with flowers and herbs that attract beneficial insects. These include dill, fennel, sweet alyssum, zinnias, cosmos, marigolds, sunflowers, borage and many others.

May

Pinch the blooms off tomato, pepper and other plants before setting them out in the garden; this will encourage root and stem growth. Continue to pinch off pepper blossoms for 2-3 weeks to establish a stronger, higher yielding plant.

Keep cutworms away from cabbage, broccoli and other susceptible plants by putting a cardboard or plastic collar around each plant, or sprinkle ground up oyster shells, cat litter, sharp sand, or other gritty material around each one.

Keep weeding and thinning plants. To keep down weeds, mulch plants with dried grass clippings, sections of newspaper covered with straw, black landscape fabric or black plastic. Do not mulch with wood chips or bark, which takes nitrogen out of the soil as it decomposes.

As peas ripen, pick pods when tender, to keep plants producing.

Don't let transplants or young seedlings dry out. Use a drip irrigation system, soaker hose, sprinkler, or hand-held hose with a water breaker (shower head), to keep beds evenly moist, but not too wet.

Plant warm-season crops like tomatoes and peppers, only after danger of frost is past. Mix ½ cup of ground lime with soil in the planting hole to prevent blossom-end rot. Water each transplant with a soluble fertilizer, like compost tea or kelp extract to get them off to a good start.

Pound in stakes or install tomato cages, at planting time, to prevent plant damage later.

Set out herbs in pots or plant in garden beds.

Inspect plants daily for cucumber beetles, cabbage-worms, vine borers and flea beetles, which can be excluded with row covers. For plants requiring cross-pollination- cucumber, squash, melon, pumpkin- take covers off when plants are flowering, to let in pollinators.

Hand pick cabbage worms from broccoli and other members of the cabbage family, or spray with Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*). Bt may injure non-pest butterfly larvae, though, so use judiciously.

June

Plant a second crop of beans.

Keep watering and weeding; mulch new crops to keep them from drying out.

Learn to identify beneficial insects and keep a vigilant eye out for possible pest infestations.

If aphids are a serious problem, apply a light spray of horticultural oil, or insecticidal soap. Lady bird beetles will usually keep aphids in check.

Hand pick cabbage worms from broccoli and other members of the cabbage family, or spray with Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), if necessary.

Hand pick Colorado potato beetle adults, larvae and orange egg masses on potato and eggplant plants.

Hand pick harlequin bugs and their black and white eggs from plants in the cabbage family. Do the same for Mexican bean beetles (yellow egg masses on leaf undersides).

Prevent flea beetle infestations with row covers.

Spray with pyrethrum or neem, both are derived from plants and considered low-risk organic controls. A light dusting of eggplant leaves with flour or wood ash can also deter flea beetles.

Search the undersides of squash and pumpkin leaves for copper-colored squash bug eggs, and destroy them.

For slug damage, in a wet period, set out tuna cans filled with beer or a brew of molasses, water and yeast. The slugs will crawl into them and drown. Boards and grapefruit rinds, turned face down, will also attract slugs; turn the board or rind over in the morning and destroy the slugs.

Pinch off tomato suckers, to encourage larger, earlier fruit, especially if training to one central stem.

July

Sow heat-tolerant greens like Swiss chard, Malabar spinach, mustard greens and lettuce cultivars like 'Red Sails', 'Deer Tongue' and 'Jericho'. Planting

in semi-shade, or covering with a shade cloth or row cover helps reduce heat stress in mid-summer.

Sow seeds of broccoli, cauliflower, turnips, beets and other fall crops in late July.

Sow seeds of squash, beans and cucumbers through the end of July.

Monitor squash and pumpkin vines for squash vine borers. If leaves are wilting, or you see holes in the lower stems, with sawdust-like fresh, or droppings around the holes, slit the stem above the hole and with a razor and remove the larva. Then mound soil around the injured stem.

If tomatoes or peppers develop blossom-end rot, remove injured fruits, water plants well, and mulch to conserve soil moisture. Consistent watering and adequate calcium can prevent this disorder.

Harvest onions when tops die back; let them dry in the garden after digging them up, or tie the stems together and hang them up in a garage or attic with good air circulation. Store onions in a cool, dry place.

Dig up garlic when the tops yellow and die; let dry in the sun, then store in an airy place before braiding, or storing in mesh bags, and hanging in a dry place.

Cut back herbs to keep them bushy and productive.

August

Plant a late crop of basil, cilantro, and dill.

Plant a last crop of snap beans the first week of August.

Plant cool season crops, including spinach, lettuce, carrots, beets, broccoli, cauliflower, Chinese cabbage, turnips, kale and mustard. Keep seedlings moist and mulched.

Order garlic, walking onions, and shallots for fall planting.

Harvest leaves of herbs before they flower. Pick individually, and dry indoors, or hang the stems a dry, semi-shady room. Store dry leaves in air-tight jars. Fresh basil leaves freeze well in plastic bags that can be sealed.

Keep weeding and watering.

September

Plant cover crops of oats, winter rye and crimson clover through the middle of October, in any empty beds, to improve soil.

Take a soil test, if you did not earlier in the year.

Plant garlic from Sept. 15 through November 1.

If winter squashes and pumpkins are full-sized and the rinds are hardened, cut them from the vine and store in a cool location (e.g. basement or porch). Rub rind thoroughly with a weak, bleach solution- 10%. This will help prevent fruit rots.

Dig potatoes after foliage dies back. Let them lie on the ground a few hours, then store, unwashed, in a cool (35 to 40° F.), dark location.

Harvest green tomatoes, and put in a paper bag with an apple or banana, to encourage ripening. Or hang the plant upside down, in a cool, dry room, out of the sun, and fruits will ripen.

October

Continue to dig potatoes and to harvest pumpkins and winter squashes.

Carrots, turnips and parsnips may be over-wintered by covering the bed with a deep straw or leaf mulch. Harvest, as needed.

Plant lettuce, spinach, radishes and corn salad through the middle of the month. Protect with row covers or a cold frame.

Dig up small herb plants, pot them in soil-less mix and bring them indoors for winter use. A sunny window, or cool, white fluorescent lights will help keep them productive. Keep them away from excessive heat or drafts, and turn down the thermostat at night.

Build new garden beds by sheet mulching: cut grass low, cover with sections of newspaper, then with layers of organic matter, such as compost, leaves, garden clippings, kitchen scraps; top with a thick layer of straw or other mulch.

Start collecting newspaper, and paper bags for sheet mulching in the spring.

November

Amend soil according to soil test results. Dig organic matter into garden beds: composted manure, mushroom soil, composted leaves and vegetable matter will help improve soil.

Add a thick blanket of shredded leaves to prevent erosion and nutrient run-off.

Protect late-planted crops like beets, spinach and broccoli raab with a cold frame, plastic sheeting over hoops, or a row cover.

Rake and compost fallen tree leaves for the garden.

Clean, sharpen, and store tools.

December

Review garden notes and think about what you would do differently next season.

Make a garden plan for 2010.

Order catalogs for next year.

List the seeds and plants you want to try next spring.

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Check out our blog- share gardening knowledge, recipes, and experiences with other gardeners. www.groweat.blogspot.com

Get answers to gardening questions and problems- call the Home and Garden Information Center hotline Mon.-Fri., 8am-1pm (1.800.342.2507). Send us e-mail questions 24/7 through the web site.

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